

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks at a Laborers' International Union of North America Apprentice and Training Center in DeForest, Wisconsin
February 8, 2023

The President. Hello, hello, hello! If you have a seat, take one. If you don't, come on up on stage with me. [*Laughter*]

Well, thank you very much. You know——

[*At this point, the President's picked up a different microphone.*]

Got it over here.

Hey, folks. How are you?

[*The President briefly addressed audience members on the balcony as follows.*]

Don't jump. Don't jump.

Well, hello, Madison. Hello, Laborers. And hello, hello, hello, Terry O'Sullivan, one of my best buddies in labor in my entire career.

The thing about Terry is, whatever he says, he does, even when circumstances change. I love the people that say, "I'll be there with you," and then they say, "Oh, I can't anymore; things have changed." Whatever he tells you, he does. Whatever he tells you, he does. And we've been working together since he was 12 years old.

No, I'm only joking.

But you know, every time I have a problem in Delaware, Gov, I just go across the river to New Jersey and make sure everything got squared away. [*Laughter*] You think I'm joking. This is the most reliable guy and one of the most reliable guys in labor or business. And I really appreciate it.

So, look, I want to thank Sarah for that introduction. And, boy, can she wield a mean hockey stick. [*Laughter*]

I tell you, I was in the back—the reason we were taking a little longer is, I have a granddaughter who's a hell of an athlete. She's going to graduate this year from college. But she's—she played lacrosse and field hockey. I mean, excuse me, lacrosse and soccer, All-State in both subjects—in both sports. And she went off to school, and she said, "I can't work 40 hours a week on the field and still do well in school." So she decided to stay. I was hoping she'd go pro. But anyway, you know what I mean.

But I was telling my introducer she reminds me very much of my granddaughter. She even looks like her.

At any rate, Madam Mayor, thanks for the passport into town. Appreciate it. Where is she? And—there you are.

And, Governor Evers, you're the—you're a great partner, man. You've been a great partner when I—all the way back when I was Vice President, and even now. And I can't tell you how much I appreciate your leadership. I really, really mean it. Thank you. Thank you.

And Representative Mark Pocan, a great Congressman, a friend who's always fighting for working families. And you helped us get so much done for union members in the last couple years.

Look, you know, she couldn't be here today, but Tammy Baldwin—Tammy Baldwin is—fights so damn hard for this State. If I do anything that doesn't start off with the word "Wisconsin," I get a note from Tammy. But all kidding aside, she's incredible.

Earthquakes in Turkey and Syria

Before we get started, I want to take a moment to—on behalf of the American people, and our thoughts and prayers go out to the people of Turkey and Syria. You know, they're—the death toll is rising. It's one of the worst earthquakes in that region in over a hundred years. And we mourn the loss of so many lives, and we offer our deepest condolences.

You know, it's amazing watching these people try to pull out—pulling out of—from under this rubble and these terrible buildings. But all the—the earthquake was incredibly powerful, significant aftershocks, and a second quake. But you see dads or moms pulling little babies out from underneath the—this rubble. So many people dying. And our thoughts are also with the survivors who've been torn apart by this tragedy.

As I told President Erdogan when I called him immediately when the first quake hit, that the United States is offering our full support—full support—rescue and recovery teams, and our NATO ally deploying teams, with U.S. Agency of International Development drawing additional resources, including our Armed Forces in Europe to assist Turkey's teams on the ground.

In Syria, the U.S. is supporting humanitarian partners who are responding with equipment and assistance and have been conducting urgent, urgent search-and-rescue missions from day one, even in the face of staff members' death and injuries on that first day. The United States is the leading donor—leading donor—across all the areas of Syria, no matter who controls the territory. It's about saving human life.

We remain steadfast in our commitment to supporting the people of Turkey and Syria in this time of need.

National Economy

Last night—last night—I reported on the state of the Union. It is strong. It is strong. And it's strong because of you, because the soul of the Nation is strong, the backbone of this Nation is strong, and the people of this Nation are strong.

And I've said so many times—often told the Democrats and Republicans—we can actually work together. We actually work together. All the things we did were bipartisan, all the major initiatives. And besides, I signed over 300 bipartisan bills beyond the big ones.

Folks, look, last night I said if we couldn't work together the last Congress—if we could work together last Congress, there's no reason we can't get things done as well with this Congress. And I mean that.

You know, people sent us a clear message: Fighting for the sake of fighting gets us nowhere. We are getting things done. It's always been my vision for this country.

And today I'm here to talk about one part of that vision: the economy that works for working people. This is a blue-collar blue change we're seeing. You know, an economy where we're building—we've built more in the last 2 years, since I've taken office, than you can imagine.

We've created 12 million new jobs, a half a million jobs just last month. And we've now created more jobs in 2 years—more jobs in 2 years than any President has created in a single 4-year term.

Look, the unemployment rate is 3.4 percent, a 50-year low. Gas prices are down more than \$1.50, and we're going to make sure the oil companies start playing their honest role. It's going to go down further.

Inflation has fallen 6 months straight. And inflation is coming down, take-home pay to workers is going up slightly. Manufacturing is rebounding at the fastest rate in almost 40 years.

The economy is growing at a solid clip. Folks, I hate to disappoint them, but the Biden economic plan is working. It's working.

But that's not news to any of you. The Laborers here in Wisconsin, the union workers across the country are seeing it firsthand. Because for the first time in a long time, we're building an economy from the bottom up and the middle out—from the bottom up and the middle out—with products made in America, with union labor. Not "labor." Union labor. I mean it.

My American plan—my economic plan is for the middle and working class Americans that get up every morning and go to work and bust their necks just trying to get an honest living.

You know, my dad used to have an expression. He wasn't a college guy. He regretted he never got to go to college. But my dad worked like hell. My dad used to say—and I mean this sincerely—and all the kids in the family know it. He'd say: "Joey, a job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about respect. It's about being able to look your kid in the eye and say, 'Honey, it's going to be okay,' and mean it." And mean it.

Look, I've said many times, Wall Street did not build this country; the middle class built the country. And unions built the middle class. And that's a fact. And for real, that's the God's truth. And by the way, and now you're rebuilding the country.

I signed a once-in-a-generation investment in putting Americans to work rebuilding our national infrastructure. It was bipartisan. Republicans signed on to it too—not all of them, but enough to get it passed.

And by the way, I told them—even those that didn't vote for it called and say, "We need a project in my district." I say: "Okay, good. We'll do it. See you at the groundbreaking." [Laughter] You know. But really. I'm President for all of America.

You know, at the Port of Green Bay, we're helping turn an old water plant site into a new port terminal. Going to create thousands of jobs over time. This is big deal.

You know, we're just up the road in Columbia County—just up the road, funds from the infrastructure are going to replace the Wisconsin River Bridge. Here in Madison, the mayor can tell you, we're using the funding to buy 46 electric buses, replacing dirty diesel buses that are bad health for the environment.

Each of these projects means jobs for laborers, plumbers, pipefitters, electricians, carpenters, cement masons, ironworkers, and so many more. These are good jobs, jobs you can raise a family on. And most don't require a college degree.

Jobs where people don't have to leave home in search of an opportunity. But they do require at least 4 years of trained apprenticeships, which is one of the reasons the United States has the best trained workers in the world, like you.

And by the way, the vast majority of Americans don't know that. We ought to tell them—keep telling them. Every time they say, "Why are you so prolabor?" Because you're the best

workers in the world. And they say, "How's that?" Nobody decides, "I want to be a laborer," "I want to be a plumber," or "I want to be an electrician." It takes you 4 years busting your neck, basically going back to school, to be able to become certified. That's why you're the best. You're the best educated in what you do. I really mean it.

I spoke with members of the Business Roundtable, the big business guys. And they asked why am I so pro-labor. Because you save them money. What you do lasts. What you do lasts.

And through the American Rescue Plan, we're funding workforce development programs, including 128 million here in Wisconsin—dollars in Wisconsin, so American workers are prepared to compete in the economy we're building. This is a blue-collar blueprint to rebuild America.

And we're also doing something that for years people just talked about. We're going to buy American for everything we build. Last night I announced we're proposing new standards to require all construction materials used on Federal infrastructure projects be made in America: American lumber, American glass, American drywall, American fiber optics, American roads, bridges, highways made with American products.

My first 2 years in office, we've created 800,000 manufacturing jobs. Where—I mean it sincerely, jobs you can live on. Where is it written America can't lead the world in manufacturing again? I didn't see it written anywhere.

Our economic agenda has ignited a new manufacturing boom. Just outside of Madison, Arrowhead Pharmaceuticals is going to hire 250 workers at a drug manufacturing facility. Georgia-Pacific has committed to a major expansion of the Green Bay paper production facility, bringing in a hundred new employees and hiring 500 construction workers.

For decades, we've imported product—we've imported products from abroad and sent jobs overseas, because they thought it was cheaper to have the cheaper labor. Now America is exporting product overseas and creating jobs here at home.

Look, I didn't come from a poor family. I came from a typical middle class family: split-level home, four kids, a grandpop living with us. It wasn't so private for my mom and dad, but we thought it was good. *[Laughter]* But all kidding aside, typical middle class family.

For decades, the backbone of America—the middle class—had been hollowed out. It's been hollowed out. Good-paying manufacturing jobs moved overseas—production—because it was cheaper there.

When jobs moved overseas, factories at home closed down. You saw it in Janesville, where Sarah, a woman you just heard from, is from. When the last assembly line was shut down at a GM plant 2 days before Christmas in 2008, thousands of people lost their jobs at the plant and the surrounding businesses that the plant kept alive.

Look, think about how many moms and dads had to have that conversation with their kids: "Honey, I just lost my job. We've got to move, honey. I'm not sure where. We can't live here anymore. No job."

Once-thriving cities and towns became shadows of what they used to be. And when those towns were hollowed out, something else was lost: pride, self-esteem, a sense of self-worth. But now we're going to turn that around.

We're building an economy where no one's going to be left behind. My economic plan is about investing in places, people that had been forgotten.

As part of that plan, I talked last night about things we're going to do for families. Just a little more breathing room. Just to give them, as my dad would say, "just a little more breathing room." At the end of the month, when everything is paid, you have just a little more breathing room.

We're going to lower the cost of everyday products for you all. And we're talking—taking on what we call "junk fees," those hidden surcharges businesses use to make you pay more. We're making airlines show just how the full price of the ticket costs up front, not after the fact, and refund your money if your flight is canceled.

We've reduced the exportation—excuse me—the exorbitant bank overdraft fees, saving an American taxpayer a million—a billion dollars a year, just those fees that were exorbitant for an overdraft.

We're proposing to cut credit card fees by 75 percent, and now they average—if it's—if you're over—if you're late on a payment by a day, it's 30 bucks. Guess what? It's going to be \$8 now.

I heard a commentator on the way, flying out here on Air Force One—the television was on—talking about little things, like junk fees. He says: "Why isn't Biden talking about important things, important issues? Why, the next thing he's going to be talking about is taking in your garbage." [Laughter]

Well, let me tell you something: Junk fees may not matter to the wealthy people, but they matter to most folks, like the home I grew up in. They add hundreds of dollars—they add hundreds of dollars a month and make it harder to pay your bills or afford that family trip.

I know how unfair it feels when a company overcharges you and think they can get away with it. They play us for suckers. And it makes you angry, at least it does me. Frankly, it offends me to think about it.

So I'm calling on Congress to pass a Junk Free [Fee; White House correction] Prevention Act so we can do more than [to; White House correction] crack down on these junk fees.

For too long, workers have been getting stiffed. You know, 30 million workers, the vast majority of them on an hourly wage, had to sign noncompete agreements when they took their job. Thirty million. These aren't trade secrets they're hiding. They are hourly wages.

That's when a construction worker on a jobsite can't cross the street and take a job with another outfit to make a couple more bucks.

We're banning these agreements for companies that compete—won't compete, so they pay people the fair share. Why in God's name do you tell a worker—an hourly worker—that they have to sign an agreement, that they will not take a similar job in—anywhere in the area?

Look, one of my objectives is to store the dignity of work—to restore it.

You know, we've made a lot of progress over the past 2 years. Many of you have seen, we've had a spirited debate last night with my Republican friends. [Laughter]

My Republicans friends, they seemed shocked—[laughter]—when I raised the plans of some of their Members and their caucus to cut Social Security. And Marjorie Taylor Greene and others stood up and said, "Liar! Liar!" [Laughter] It reminds of that "Liar, liar, house on fire." [Laughter] Yes.

Well, guess what? You know, I remind you that Rick Scott from Florida, the guy who ran the U.S. Senate campaign, has a plan. I've got his brochure right here. [Laughter] It has a plan. Here's what he says in his plan. Let me get—open it up here. I'm sorry.

[The President read from the brochure as follows.]

He says: "All federal legislation sunsets every 5 years. If the law is worth keeping, Congress can pass it again." Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid.

And by the way, you have Senator——

[*The President cleared his throat.*]

——[*laughter*]——named Ron Johnson.

Audience members. Boo!

The President. Ron Johnson, on Social Security and Medicare, quote: "We should transfer everything so we have to consider everything every year."

Audience members. Boo!

The President. Come on, man.

And then—and then we found there was a—you know, there's a Senator named Mike Lee, who was also yelling, you know, "Liar, liar, house on fire" kind of stuff last night. Well, I didn't even know this, but they played a video showing him—he said—when I said they wanted—I didn't say the whole party. I said, "Republicans"—"Leading Republicans want to cut Social Security and Medicare."

And so they played last night something I didn't even know existed, a video of him saying: "I'm here right now to tell you one thing you probably never heard from a politician. It will be my objection to phase out Social Security, pull it up by its roots, get rid of it." Then he added—I'm quoting this now—"Medicare and Medicaid are the same sort. They need to be pulled up." It sounds pretty clear to me. How about you?

But they sure didn't like me calling them on it.

Look, a lot of Republicans, their dream is to cut Social Security and Medicare. Well, let me just say this: It's your dream, but I'm going to—my veto pen make it a nightmare.

But here's, actually, the good news. There's a lot of good Republicans. I found it interesting that when I called them out on that last night, it sounded like they agreed to take these cuts off the table.

Remember I said—no, I'm serious. Remember what I said? I said, "So you're not going to cut it, huh?" "No!" I said, "Okay, we've got a deal." Well, I sure hope that's true. I'll believe it when I see it and their budget's laid down with their cuts they're proposing.

But it looks like we negotiated a deal last night on the floor of the House of Representatives. [*Laughter*] Seriously. You seen them all standing up, saying, "We're not going cut anything"? Well, that's good. Because, by the way, we got a lot of good bipartisan stuff done in the previous year. Why can't we do it again?

Here's the bottom line: All of you have been paying into the system with every single paycheck you've had since you started working. These benefits belong to you, the American worker. You earned it. And I will not allow anyone to cut them—not today, not tomorrow, not ever—period.

You know, some Republicans in Congress are even threatening to have America default on its debt if I don't agree to the cuts they want. Democrats have never, ever done that, by the way.

Now, let's talk about what our national debt is. Everybody thinks it's like what we spend this year versus last.

The national debt is the total debt and interest accumulated over 220 years. You hear me? Two hundred—over 200 years. Every single year that we went and spent more than we took in, it added up. So the Federal debt you're hearing about is not the yearly debt, it's 220 or so years of accumulated debt. Democrats, Republicans, everybody.

But here's the deal: Our credit has been good. We've never missed a payment as a nation on the debt we have. Why in God's name would America give up the progress we've made for the chaos they're suggesting?

This Nation has done—gone through too much. We've come too far to let that happen. I won't, not on my watch.

And while there's more work to do, it's clear our plan is working because of the grit and resolve of the American worker. And I'm not trying to just be nice to you. I've been saying this my whole career.

We're going to keep lowering costs for families. We're going to keep putting shovels in the ground to rebuild our infrastructure, our supply chains, and manufacture more here at home. You know, in the communities across the country that were too easily written off for dead, we're going to see not only jobs and economic opportunity return, but a sense of pride.

I'm from Scranton, Pennsylvania. I was raised in a little steel town called Claymont, Delaware. There's no more steel being made. Scranton, because of coal—everyone is from Scranton. And just like you're going to see here in Wisconsin, we're going to make sure that what we do is, we rebuild these communities.

Let me close with this. I've long said it's never been a good bet to get—bet against America. Not a joke. That's what I've told all—I've been doing foreign policy for a long time. I know every major world leader for the last 35 years. I know them face to face. I did it for the previous President, my President, Barack Obama. And I'm doing it now.

I can say honestly, as I stand here today, I have never, ever been more optimistic about America's future than I am today. We just have to remember who in God's name we are. We're the United States of America. We're the best positioned nation in the world to lead the world in the 21st century.

There's nothing—nothing—beyond our capacity if we work together. And it's my hope we're going to find enough Republicans who want to do that.

And God bless you all, and may God protect our troops. Thank you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:49 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Terry O'Sullivan, general president, Laborers' International Union of North America (LiUNA); Sarah Varga, apprentice, LiUNA Local 464; Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway of Madison, WI; and Sen. Tammy S. Baldwin. He also referred to his granddaughter Roberta M. "Maisy" Biden, brothers Francis W. and James B. Biden, and sister Valerie Biden Owens.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Laborers' International Union of North America apprentice and training center in DeForest, WI.

Locations: DeForest, WI.

Names: Baldwin, Tammy S.; Biden, Francis W.; Biden, James B.; Biden, Roberta M. "Maisy"; Erdogan, Recep Tayyip; Evers, Anthony S.; Greene, Marjorie Taylor; Johnson, Ronald H.; Lee, Michael S.; Obama, Barack; O'Sullivan, Terry; Owens, Valerie Biden; Pocan, Mark; Rhodes-Conway, Satya; Scott, Richard L.; Varga, Sarah.

Subjects: Bipartisanship; Economic improvement; Economic stimulus legislation; Employer noncompete agreements, regulation efforts; Federal deficit and debt; Gasoline costs; Government contracting and procurement, improvement efforts; Inflation; Infrastructure improvements; International Development, U.S. Agency for; Job creation and growth; Junk fees imposed on consumers, prevention efforts; Labor movement and organized labor; Laborers' International Union of North America (LiUNA); Manufacturing industry, domestic investment; Medicare and Medicaid programs; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Port infrastructure, U.S. improvement efforts; Social Security program; State of the Union Address; Syria, earthquake damage and recovery efforts; Syria, U.S. assistance; Turkey, earthquake damage and recovery efforts; Turkey, President; Turkey, U.S. assistance; Wisconsin, Governor; Wisconsin, LiUNA Laborers Apprentice and Training Center in DeForest; Wisconsin, President's visit.

DCPD Number: DCPD202300097.